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Like Switching Seats on the Titanic

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LIKE SWITCHING SEATS ON THE TITANIC

My father sprays the kitchen wall with pee. “*Ay Dios*,” he says, his hands cupping his crotch. “It feels like fire.”

My mother’s neck wrinkles like a cork.

“*Borracho*,” she hisses, her copper eyes widening. “*No tienes corazón*.”

My drunken father has no heart.

I boil *palo sagrado*, stirring the bark with a flat spoon. As the orange liquid slides down my father’s throat, I inhale his sweat, his drink, the parts of him I can’t reach.

“And you,” my mother jerks my hair. “You.”

My father’s ears ooze blood, his left eyebrow is ripped.

“Tell her, *mi’ja*,” he says. “You saw me.” He waves an empty bottle and smacks his chest. “I showed them heart.”

I rinse out the bottle, then fill it with *siemprevivas*. The dried flowers stand like stiff flags along the windowsill.

My mother stares at the wall, her arms folded like shutters. Cracks frame the side of her mouth.

“*Mi amor, mi vida*.”

My father leans on his elbow. “Look, for you.”

My mother grabs the gold chain, holding it up to the light. Something in her face shifts.

“Ignacio,” she says. Her voice is husky. “*Mi Nacho*.” She wipes his face with a wet cloth, stroking his cheek until he sleeps.

My mother unwinds her braid, her hair falling like a garden past her shoulders. She tightens her yellow shawl, then rubs her hands with cream.

“I’m going,” she says.

“Where?”

“To see my sister.”

“Which one?” I ask.

“Does it matter?”

My father snores. My mother pinches his lips as if snuffing out a candle.

My mother walks like she's riding a breeze, her legs gliding smoothly underneath. Her eyes are sooty, with yellow sparks. When gringos aim their cameras at the basket of *chapulines* on her head, she lunges at the lens with a fist of the dried grasshoppers. My mother's stare, her *mal ojo*, can make it rain. I have seen it happen.

My mother says I am the Mean One. She elbows me in the ribs.

"¿Y ellas?" I point to my younger sisters.

Lili plays the accordion for gringos in the outdoor cafe, singing and tapping her feet. Mari tugs a stranger's sleeve. Her cheeks dimple, her smile flashing like a comet.

My mother counts the pesos they drop in her lap. She wipes her hands on her skirt.

"See," her elbow says. "You are the Useless One, as well."

My father and I watch *Lente Loco* on a television with a spider-web crack. We laugh like firecrackers at the same parts, our bodies tilting on the couch. He shows me how to break a person's finger with my teeth. The part below the knuckle is the easiest to grip. My father says life is like switching seats on the *Titánico*. "*Ni modo*," he shrugs, "you're still going down."

My name is Donaji. I am named after a Zapotec princess, who was beheaded for betrayal.

"*Coloradito es una salsa*," my father recites. "Chile, sesame seed, raisin, tomato." The tourists flip the menu and point.

They suck on limes and lick the rims of their margaritas.

"Your *pollo*," my father asks. "Leg or breast?"

The man puts his fists under his shirt and wiggles his pinkies.

My father brings more drinks. "We make the *mescal* in Tlacolula," he says. "From the *piñas*, the hearts of the agave cactus." He signals me with his chin.

"My grandfather was a *mezcalero*," I add, wobbling on my feet. "He drink like a burro."

As the couple laughs, my father refills their glasses, then ties a bib around their necks to catch the *mole* sauce. His fingers linger on the clasp of the woman's necklace.

"The worm!" I say, shaking the bottle in the air. "You eat the worm."

The woman gasps. The man spills his drink.

My father nods. The necklace is gone.

Later, we sit in the *zócalo*, listening to a marimba band. I kick off my shoes and undo the top button of my father's white shirt.

The moon behind the trees looks like a thumbprint.

"*Véte a casa*," my father says. "Your mother will worry." His lips heat my forehead, my cheeks. He lights two cigarettes. Our smoke rings tremble.

"*Préférez-vous aller au cinéma?*"

The woman shrugs. She curls her hair over her lip like a moustache.

"*Que voulez-vous boire? Une bouteille de vin blanc? Une bière?*" She is *une jolie femme*, he says, the most beautiful in all of Oaxaca. In Quebec, he shivers, the nights are cold.

They sit in an outdoor cafe, chewing *botanes* of peanuts, garlic and onions. He fans his mouth with the fringes of her yellow shawl and orders more beer. Their legs touch under the table. She stares without blinking.

Suddenly, the woman stands and tilts her head. She bookmarks the air with a finger.

I wipe my sweaty forehead. I step into the shadows and run.

"How is *Tía Rosa*?"

"*Bien*," my mother answers.

"And *Tía Carmen*?"

"*Bien*."

"You saw them both?"

"*Sí*."

"Who first?"

My mother turns her back to me, cooking *tlayuda con asiento*, flattening the large tortilla, topping it with pork sauce and cheese. She licks her fingers, then looks up and frowns, as if she has wandered into the wrong kitchen.

"A man has been calling," I say.

My mother shrugs into her shawl.

"He asks for you. Ju - li - sa," I say, slurring the sounds. Ju-li-sa, like his mouth is full.

My mother stands still, her jaw tightening like a screw.

I pick off a piece of melted *quesillo*. I smile like a cartoon fox.

I stick gum in the keys of Lili's accordion and tie Mari's wrists with purple ribbons.

I fight with Don Hugo's daughter. I crush her glasses and rip out chunks of her hair.

"*Perdóname*," I say, then turn quiet as dust.

My mother's anger blows my sisters from the room, spins my father from his stool in the *cantina*. My mother's face is a swollen cloud, her words spit like sleet. My father grabs her shoulders, stretching her out like a rolling pin.

"*Cálmate*," he whispers, bringing *té de canela* for her to sip.

My father lashes the tree behind our house with his belt. I throw my head back and howl like a coyote.

"Next time with *la muchacha ésa*," he says, shuffling his feet, "you do this."

My father puts his fists up. He bobs his head. I throw right jabs until I ache.

"*Tu mamá es una santa*," my father says, his arm around my shoulder. "Cry a little when you go inside."

My mother cuddles the phone under her chin, her head poking out from the yellow shawl like a turtle. She massages her hands with cream.

"How is *Tía Licha*?" I ask. "*Tía Chelo*? *Tía Lupe*?" I count names until I run out of knuckles. I stir the *sopa de guías*, flipping corn dumplings, sinking chile peppers with my spoon. I imagine the fat man, his skin pale like *jícara*, blue sunglasses hiding his eyes. Snapping bills in his money clip toward my mother, her fingertips pecking, like the beak of a bird.

"*Con dinero, baila el perro*," I say and rub my palms together. "How much does he pay?"

My mother chops vine shoots and squash, her face narrowing like a nail.

"Ju- li-sa," I lisp. "Ju- li-sa."

My mother grabs a broom. My sisters clap their hands. "*Otro, otro*," they shout, as my mother hits me a second time, and then again.

I run like a horse, my sandals smacking the cobblestones. I step on torn *lotería* tickets, jump over shoeshine boys, weave among the mylar balloons. Past policemen reading comic books of naked women, past the zig-zagged line outside the *tortillería*. I dart between dusty buses, their destinations scrawled in white ink across the windshields.

When I run, my skin loosens up. I can feel it shredding, the wind sharp against my new flesh.

I rest in the Basilica de Soledad, my head against a pew. The Virgin of Solitude looks down from behind a glass window, a halo on her head, a gold robe under her black cape. Outside the confession box, the kneeling rug is frayed. Sweat drips from my elbows.

I run again. I burst from within. Behind me, my skin whooshes like silk, like wind on a still pond.

Lili plays the accordin, Mari shreds carnations in the air. My mother takes out photo albums and quizzes my father. He has learned to come close. I flip the pages, searching for a face that looks like mine.

"When I first saw your mother," my father says, "she was sitting with her sisters. She slid her skirt up and stretched her legs, like this. Each time I walked by, I had to look."

"You're still looking," my mother says.

My father kisses her hand.

"*Un naco, un bruto,*" my sisters called you. They said I was too good for you."

"They were right."

"You had a black eye. You told them you were going to be a priest."

"*Imagine.*"

My parents kiss like movie stars. The air is sleepy. My mother's hair covers my father's face. She catches my eye and smiles like she's caught a ride on an angel.

I spy behind corners. My mother leans her body into the half-circle of his. The man is as plump as July.

"*Zapoteca,*" she says.

"*Zzzzapoteca?*"

"No, ssss," she says. "Like this."

The man places strawberries between her lips. She puts all his rings on her fingers, then hugs a bunch of lillies, sprouting from her sides like wings. The moon, a bald spot of light, nests in the trees like a cracked egg.

Santa, santa, tu mamá es una santa, my feet find a rhythm. My throat tightens, my heart kicks. *Una santa, santa.* My nose leaks.

My father slices the bottom of a knapsack, snatches a purse and blends into the crowd. He lifts a wallet from a back pocket, slides off a ring.

"You get close, like this," he says. "*Calladito,*" he puts a finger to his lips, "like a shadow. You keep walking. Afterwards, you never look back."

My father buys sugar cane for my sisters, a tin skeleton for my mother. We get matching baseball caps and push them low so only our noses peak out. My

father drinks until his mouth hangs open. I watch him throw punches like a windmill. “*Un hombre no debe llorar por el amor de una mujer,*” he sings. He leans on my shoulder. A man should not cry for a woman’s love.

“*Tu papá es un ladrón,*” my mother says, tightening her yellow shawl. She steps around his sleeping body. “A thief,” she says. “Nothing here belongs to me.”

My father and I watch “*Cristina.*” A panel of married women talk about their lovers. The audience hoots.

Pots rattle in the kitchen. I squirm on the couch, my legs shifting like a scissor.

“*Mátalos,*” my father says, louder the second time, twisting his head toward the kitchen. He’d kill them both.

“*¿La neta?*” I ask. “The truth, *papi.* Then what.”

My mother stands in the doorway, her eyes wide, her nose testing the wind like a deer.

My father hikes his finger to the front door. “*Me pinto de colores,*” he says. “Without your mother there’d be nothing left.”

“Ay, Ignacio,” she says. “*Mi Nacho.*” Her voice is wobbly.

While folding laundry, I find the photographs, taped to the bottom of my father’s drawer. I flip them quickly, then lay them on the bed as if to dry. A teenager kneels naked, her breasts hanging like pitchers. She looks over her shoulder, her thighs taut, a wine-colored stain on her neck. She sits on my father’s knee. Her hair flags like a matador’s cape. His boxing trunks are red.

The young woman smiles, bursting like a piñata. It is a smile of many teeth. Her skin is the color of *mole*. She looks everything like me.

I stop eating. I am too weak to run. My mother says I have *aire*, that a gust of air has entered my body and remained stuck. My head is hot from headaches. My father spits on his fingers and rubs my forehead. My mother says I have been thinking too much.

I dream of the *tabayuku*. She appears out of darkness, dancing like a flame at the foot of my father’s bed. Her hands melt through his as she leads him to her cave. She turns my father crazy with her kisses. His soul wanders the earth.

"Donaji," a voice calls. I hear the whirr of insects, my blood swishing, the air rushing from my nose. "Donaji." The leaves whistle, the branches of the trees hang like broken fingers.

Outside the Church of Santa María de Tule, my sisters sit like dolls on my mother's knees. She checks their hair for lice. She wets their necks with kisses.

My father reads the plaque against the the Árbol del Tule. He says the tree is the widest in the world, that it has been holding secrets for two thousand years.

"*Qué feo*," my mother frowns. "It looks like the back of an old woman's hand."

My father tells his boxing stories, how his picture still hangs in all the cantinas of San Bartolo. "*Respeto*," he says. "Without it, you are nothing." He shuffles his feet. "Life is in the ring," he says. "All the rest is waiting."

My mother rubs her eyes. She says my father is spitting in the wind.

"*Te amo*," he says, his hand crawling up her leg.

"*No me toques*," she hisses, turning her back, her hair coiled like a snake.

I slip under a chain and stretch my arms against the tree. The bark smells like damp earth. Lili and Mari try to pull me off. I kick their shins until they cry.

My mother takes my sisters inside the church. She doesn't answer my father's call.

"Donaji," my father says. "*¿Qué onda*, what's going on?" He covers me with his body. "*¿Qué onda?*" Thunder breaks. The bark scrapes my cheek. I feel our shiver.

At the Guelaguetza Fiesta, women dance in pink and yellow *huipiles*, their red sashes made from the dye of insects. They weave among men in white shirts, their feet stomping the wooden stage. When the music stops, the men throw tiny *sombreros* and beads to the crowd.

"That's her," my father says, then holds his face as if his cheeks have collapsed.

"*Es ella*," he repeats and it is like the moon falling on my head.

She stands alone on the stage with a pineapple on her shoulder. As the drums beat, she walks slowly, her ribboned hair blowing, posing at the corners of the platform.

"I was young," my father says. "She was younger."

"Why didn't you—

"She made me promise. She didn't want you to know."

I push my way through the crowd. As cameras flash, she shifts the pineapple to her other shoulder. Her fingernails are red, her lips overflow. Her neck is marked.

"*Una aventura*," my father says, "*Nada más*. She wanted to forget."

I clap my hands over my mouth, but it is too late. Her brows wrinkle; her eyes pause, then bounce off my face. The spotlight forms a halo around her neck. She swishes her skirt and disappears.

My father lays a blanket down. He pounds two poles into the ground and ties a blue plastic sheet above our heads. Mari sits in an empty crate, sucking a mango. Lili wiggles her hips to the music of Luis Miguel. My mother stands behind her baskets of teas and herbs. "*Lo que guste*," I call out. "*Cinco pesos*."

The fat man comes back again, this time for chiles. *Chipotle, piquin, amarillo, chiltepe*. He wants them all. He waves his money clip like a gold wand, then presses pesos in my mother's palm. My mother rubs her lips together, she fingers her braid. His shopping bag brushes her skirt.

I watch my father watch my mother. He cleans his teeth with a piece of straw. His eyes are muddy.

He looks to me. I look away.

My name is Donají. I am named after a Zapotec princess, who was beheaded for betrayal. One day, on the banks of the Atoyac River, beautiful flowers will grow from my head.